

Joint Non-Lethal Weapons Issues

Discussion

In recent years, U.S. forces have increasingly conducted military operations other than war. This category of operations includes such missions as humanitarian assistance, military support to civil authorities, peace operations, and noncombatant evacuations. Increased interaction between friendly troops and friendly, neutral, or hostile civilian populations has become an inevitable feature of the contemporary landscape. The tactical application of non-lethal weapons (NLWs) is often useful in such scenarios.

Non-lethal weapons are explicitly designed and primarily employed to incapacitate personnel or materiel, while minimizing fatalities, permanent injury to personnel, and collateral damage to property and the environment. A recent Joint Mission Area Analysis (JMAA) concluded the potential military effectiveness of NLWs warrants aggressive development and investment to capitalize on full spectrum non-lethal capabilities. It highlighted potential operational and strategic applications of non-lethal weapons, beyond the tactical level, to include addressing the use of human shields and achieving desired effects with precision accuracy on targets in restricted fire areas, or within a constrained rules of engagement environment.

NLWs reinforce deterrence efforts and expand the range of options available to commanders. They enhance our capability to discourage, delay, or prevent hostile action; to limit escalation; to isolate the battlespace. They also allow military action in situations where use of lethal force is not the preferred option. The DoD is now in the process of fielding NLW capability sets. NLWs were employed during the withdrawal of United Nations forces from Somalia and during the intervention in Haiti. They are currently deployed and have been employed in the former Yugoslavia. Fielded systems include non-penetrating projectiles (rubber bullets and bean-bag rounds), flash-bang grenades, pepper spray, aqueous foam barriers, and caltrops.

In 1996, the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology appointed the Marine Corps DoD Executive Agent for NLWs. Leadership in this area transitioned from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) to the Joint NLW Directorate (JNLWD) in 1997. During 1999, the JNLWD updated a Memorandum of Agreement among all Services and the U.S. Special Operations Command, which establishes procedures for effective management and coordination of non-lethal efforts. A Joint Non-Lethal Weapons Master Plan was issued in 2000 outlining the vision, goals, and objectives of the program.

Marine Corps Position

This Joint concept supports the Marine Corps as the designated DoD Executive Agent for NLWs. The Executive Agent has established a set of guiding principles to ensure common direction of the Services and agencies (both Defense and non-Defense) and efficient use of resources in the development of non-lethal capabilities. The Marine Corps supports the continued development of advanced technologies and the application of those technologies at operational and strategic levels. The Marine Corps believes that NLWs provide commanders increased options for resolving complex problems encountered across the range of military operations and expand policy choices. They provide a credible capability to use discriminate, measured force to influence pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict situations.

